AN EVENING WITH SIR JOHN BOWRING.

From the Log of an Oriental Cruise.

BY H. C. VICTOR.

"CLAVIOR E TENEBRIS," exclaimed I, after a lengthened stay in the far East, and a semi-weekly perusal of the filthy, Anglo-Chinese newspapers of the "Celestial Empire;" I will go and see the old man myself, and then pass judgment on him. And just then I forgot Bowring the politician, and remembered Bowring the colossus of literature; and I saw the spirit of my old school-master, even as he was in the days of flesh and blood, when he used to hammer into my obtuse intellect the grammar of Bowring's translation of the Russian poets. And the Spirit said, "Go!" and go I would; and the Bride said, "Go!" and go I did. I saw and heard for myself, and not for another; then and there I said, that unto man should be revealed the mysteries of the Hong Kong Holy of Holies, the Governor's residence. I believe that by my revelations of the mysteries of the "Court of Hong Kong," I am violating none of the decencies which ought, as a general thing, prevent men and women from revealing the secrets of social life, for I am dealing with a man who belongs to the world; his name is public property, and his works are of the literature of the Nineteenth Century.

Familiar from boyhood up to man's estate with the name of Bowring, partially conversant with his works, and thus made an admirer of his genius, a wonderer at the extraordinary attainments of the man as a linguist and scholar, I, previous to my visit to the East, felt that it would be one of the great privileges of my life to see and know the man, and a partial reward for the sacrifices of a lengthened stay in the East Indies. An interested spectator of the momentous events which transpired in China in the autumn of '56, and the years '57 and '58, in the first of which Bowring took so prominent a part, my interest in the man was not lessened by my being a witness to his political struggles and troubles, in which his trying position as Governor of Hong Kong—at the period spoken of above—placed him. Knowing the correctness of the adage that "The slanders of a villain are a just man's praise," and the praise *vice versa*—with a full knowledge of the composition of the foreign society of the East, I deduced my own conclusions as to the correctness of the gross abuse heaped upon him by the opium-smuggling, coolie-stealing, money-changing community of Hong Kong; and was none the less anxious to see and know the Nestor of literature, and the Sir Knight who had broken a lance with Yeh of Canton.

Before we have our *yarn* with this literary contemporary and intimate of Byron, the Shellys, "The Lake School," and other giants of those days, this prime mover on the Chinese chess-board, let us briefly review the life of the man, and glance at his works, and see what claim he has to the title of *Nestor*, which we have conferred upon him; and then it will be well to "rub up" a little on all that pertains to him, for our knowledge of him may be tried and found wanting before the evening is spent.

Sir John Bowring was born at Larbear, near Exeter, England, Oct. 17, 1792, and is, consequently, now sixty-six years old. I believe he was born—as distinguished individuals generally are—"of poor but honest parents." Early known as a scholar, he soon became distinguished as a linguist; and, as such, was first made known to the world by his translations of Russian, Dutch, and Spanish metrical poetry. His knowledge of Scandinavian lore made him known, at an early age, among northern scholars. His expressed sympathy and interest in the liberal movements of the Spanish Peninsula, led, in 1822, to an acquaintance with the noted and eccentric legal philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, whose feelings were biased on that score, very much as Bowring's own. This circumstance affected his whole after life and writings; his acquaintanceship resulted in the adoption, by Bowring, of the whole of Bentham's political and legal creed—in his becoming his friend, pupil, executor, editor, and biographer. From this time his attention was, in a measure, drawn from polite literature and directed to the literature of political economy and jurisprudence. In 1825, he was installed as chief editor of that radical journal, the *Westminster Review*, which was established by Bentham, and supported in his juvenile days by his money. During his editorship of the *Review*, he first became noted as a political and polemic writer, advocating parliamentary reform and Free-trade, in somewhat the spirit of his great tutor. His distinguished abilities as a scholar—especially as a Sclavonic scholar—was the cause of his having conferred on him, by the University of Groningen, in 1828, the degree of LL. D. The now Dr. Bowring's opinions on pôlitical economy were considered of such importance by the government, that, in 1834 and 1835, he was sent to France to inquire into the state of the commerce of that country; and his report was laid before Parliament and published. Commissioned, also, to inquire into the same subject in Switzerland, Italy, the Levant, and the various states of the German Customs Union, he executed his commission, and by his reports gave the greatest satisfaction. He next shouldered the responsible office of secretary of the commission for investigating public accounts, during Earl Grey's administration.

A member of Parliament from 1835 to 1837, and again from 1841 to 1849, he was known as an advocate of liberal opinions, lending his support to those measures he had heretofore advocated with his pen. In June, 1849, he was appointed to the important post of consul to Canton, and superintendent of trade in China; and, subsequently, acting plenipotentiary. Returning to England, in 1853, in February, 1854, he was knighted and made governor, commander-in-chief, and vice-admiral of Hong-Kong, which office he still holds. In 1856, he was sent on a special mission to Siam, and succeeded in negotiating a treaty with that nation which was highly favorable to British interests, and of which our recent treaty, negotiated by Mr. Harris, is an almost *literal copy*. In the latter part of 1856, the transactions at Canton occurred, by means of which the recent war was brought about. The part taken by Gov. Bowring—necessitated by his position—in this affair, has brought him more prominently before the critical public than ever, to be judged by the same, for weal or woe.

So much for the man; now for his works — his literary performances we mean.

In the year, 1821–'3, appeared his *Specimens of Russian Poets;* 1824, *Batavian Anthology*, and *Ancient Poetry and Romances of Spain;* 1827, *Sp cimens of the Polish Poets*, and *Servian Popular Poetry;* 1830, *Poetry of the Magyars;* 1832, *Cher-*

kian Anthology; 1833, *Matins and Vespers:* 1838–'9, appeared the collected works of Jeremy Bentham, of which Bowring was editor; 1843, translations of *Manuscripts of the Queen's Court,* a collection of old Bohemian Lyrics, Epics, Songs, with other ancient Bohemian Poems; 1854, his work *On the Decimal System;* and, in 1857, appeared his standard work on Siam, entitled *History of Siam.* In polite literature Bowring figures principally as a translator; his almost unparalleled attainments in languages enabling him to be conversant with the literature of every people of Europe! He is conversant, I believe, with *seventeen different languages and tongues.* As a political and polemic writer, and as a political economist, he is known through his Review articles, his reports, and by several books on political science. His *History of Siam* classes him among historians.

We have thus seen the "Nestor" in his life and letters; let us see him in his home—there we see the man as he is. Aside from my curiosity to know a man of letters who was personally acquainted with many of that galaxy of bright intellects which Britain produced in the last of the Eighteenth and first of the Nineteenth Century, who had made his mark in literature at a time when the stars of Byron, the "Lake School," the Shellys, &c., were at their zenith, I was prompted, by a curiosity, all my own, to know one who had, for at least the long period of my long stay in the East, been subjected to the cross-fire of the detraction of a series of ten-by-twelve Hong-Kong newspapers, and the slanders of the money-makers, who sun themselves in prosperity eked out of Chinese blood and toil—of the pampered creatures who snooze their souls away under the shade of the wings of the black spirit of injustice, which shadows Hong-Kong like a pall. Knowing his antecedents, he had loomed up before my imagination like a very Milton's Satan, grand and majestic even in his attributed devilishness. Not having formed excessively harsh opinions of Bowring, in consequence of his political actions during the troubles of '56 and '57, I believe I felt prepared to judge calmly and rationally of the man as I saw him. I had long judged him harshly, however, for giving up literature for *political* preferment, and he had lost much of my respect and sympathy for wallowing in the mud of *Chinese* diplomacy.

The tedium of Hong-Kong *un*social life is, in a measure, relieved by the throwing open of the doors of the governor's house at least once a week, thereby giving the denizens of the community—whose gains smell strongly of opium-smoke and gin—a chance to inhale a little *fresh* air. From the halls of the governor a ray of sociability gleams forth, which lightens, though but faintly, the princely residences of the denizens of Hong-Kong. On the evening of ——, 1851, in compliance with an invitation from the Bowrings, in company with my friends, Mr. and Mrs. B——, I ascended the terrace on which is situated the regal mansion, prepared by the Queen of all the Britains for the residence of the *Kings* of Hong-Kong. Passing through the gateway, and by the armed sentinel, we crossed the threshold of the "Residence." Contrary to the usages which political snobbery has tried to fasten upon our dignitaries, we found ourselves admitted to this Hong-Kong Holy of Holies without any of that form and ceremony usually considered a necessary appendage of rank. The handsome *salons* of the house did not appear more bright and cheerful than did this feature of the "reception night." And here let me say is, perhaps, one secret of Sir John's unpopularity in the detestable community of Hong-Kong—his democratic simplicity! He is notedly the most democratic man in his tastes and mode of life of any resident of this modern Sodom. Towering, intellectually, head and shoulders over all, vested with great powers and high rank, Bowring, like a great soul that he is, lays aside all of those distinctions and silly forms of etiquette which are so very agreeable to the community of money-changers and crowd of army and navy snobs, which is so large an element in the composition of Hong-Kong society. A pity it is that *Americans* in the East did not wear the mantle of democracy as gracefully as does the governor of Hong-Kong. The plant removed from republican soil and placed in the Eastern hot-house, seems to thrive only in the air of snobdom and when watered by the dews of toadyism.

Entering the richly-furnished *salons* of the "Residence," we were forthwith warmly welcomed by Sir John himself, with a hearty "How do you do? I am glad to see you all." Being introduced to the "Nestor," I was bid to be most welcome to the "Residence;" informed that, as I was an American, I was greeted more warmly still; not told exactly as I frequently was at Manilla, "to consider the house and all that was in it my own;" yet I was satisfied to be given to understand that I was wished to consider myself at home for the evening with the Bowrings. I was not altogether ignorant of the appearance of the man, having seen him before, at a distance, in my perambulations around the streets of Hong-Kong; but never before had I the opportunity of *scanning* him, just as I love to do of real greatness. I was agreeably disappointed to find that, in all published portraits I had ever seen of him, I had failed to get an idea of the real looks of the man. The features were generally correct in those portraitures, but there was an entire failure in giving the expression of the countenance. Bowring is, I presume, one of those men whose features an artist cannot delineate. He stands not alone in this respect; our own Clay, I believe, was never pictured correctly—hence the varied portraits of him. I know not if the artist ever existed who could delineate a soul; such, doubtless, is not the case. Is the reason, then, of their being so many *correct* representations of the human face-divine owing to the *want* of soul in many of the race? A more purely intellectual countenance I never saw than that possessed by Sir John Bowring; a cast of face which, once seen, cannot be forgotten; a head, which, if not exactly Websterian, is yet of splendid proportions, graced by a forehead of unusual breadth and height; a head which one could swear, at first sight, contained a brain which was the seat of a great intellect. Not being a practical phrenologist I was unable to distinguish whether or not there was an unusual development of the faculty of language on that head, but I did see that the face was language. The intellect which he *looked* was seen and known, without the aid of an interpreter. The student of sixty-six stood before me modified into a much younger man. Bowring's countenance was so pleasing, with its expression of conscious intellect and unassuming simplicity, that I took the same pleasure in looking at it as I would at a fine landscape; and *that* I consider as one of the greatest pleasures of sight.

If I was pleased with his looks, I was none the less so with his conversation. Fortunate in having arrived at an unusually early hour—before other guests had

arrived—we had the monopoly of the Nestor's conversation for a season. This was what I wished, and was doubly gratified, after the close of the evening's interview, to know that I had enjoyed an unusually large share of the grand old man's conversation and attention. After the usual fire of small-arms, of complimentary allusions, &c., I opened my batteries, by remarking:

"Sir John, a few days since I met the Russian Minister, Count Pontiatine, and I was astonished to hear how well he spoke the English language; he speaks with as much correctness as though born and raised in England."

"Not quite," replied he, "but he does very well. The acquisition of language is so very easy a matter, that I think every one ought to understand one or more beside his mother tongue."

"This facility for acquiring language may all be very well in your case, who, besides your other labors, have found time to master over a dozen languages; but should you judge others by yourself? *All* have not the faculty of acquiring language."

"I believe that any person of ordinary abilities may have (if he or she will) the gift of tongues A person of good education *should* understand how to read and write at least half a dozen languages."

Understanding, as I have said, some seventeen different tongues, and speaking them all with more or less fluency, Bowring is enabled to address each of the different personages with whom he is brought in contact, in his native language, be he Russian, Dutch, Spanish, or French, &c. Most of the languages of civilization are at his tongue's end, and, if I mistake not, he is also partially conversant with the Canton dialect, the Siamese and Malayan languages.

From language, we gradually worked over on to the shore of literature, and here he was on his own ground. Without repeating the conversation as it occurred in its rambling variety, I will give the sum and substance of it. Suffice it to say that I was now most willing to be a listener.

His especial acquaintance with Byron made all he uttered referring to the poet of the greatest interest. He has now in his possession a large number of letters from him, which, if given to the world, would, no doubt, a tale unfold. "It was," said he, "by my advice that Byron went to Greece. His communications on that subject I now have." Here is a fact for Trelawney and other Byron expositors.

Running over the incidents of Byron's life and death, he said, addressing a lady guest who was great on the Byron question: "The poet's body was preserved in brandy after death, and consigned to me, in England." Here seems something open to disputation; it is a circumstance I was never before aware of.*

His estimate of Byron may be summed up in his own words: "Byron, like most men of great genius, was a man of great faults and noble qualities; a strange mixture of vice and virtue. When mean, he was magnificently so. More can be said in favor of his genius than of his character." Like many others, with Bowring, the *man* was lost sight of in the intellect. His apologetic way of discussing the merits of the poet convinced me of the truth of this.

Turning to me he said, "What has become of your Mr. W—— ? Does he still flourish in the world of American literature ?"

"Mr. W——," replied I, "still *flourishes* at his place on the Hudson river, I—— by name; he still has the same old consumption he has had for the past twenty years, and which he has, for that period of time, told us of the pleasures of dying with so much pathos and *effect*."

"I met him," said B——, "at a dinner party at ——; it appears that he afterward daguerreotyped me publicly *as the worst-dressed man in Europe*. Now," said the Governor, laughing, "I did not know before that I was particularly slovenly in my attire. How do I now look ?"

He was very plainly dressed, but perhaps not dressed enough to please a *casual visitor* to the *salons* of the British aristocracy. It may be assumed that I advised him to curl his hair and perfume the one day's growth of beard which he wore!

"I intend visiting America one of these days," said he; "will you receive an English writer on your shores ?"

"If you do not make up your mind to abuse us, *a la* Dickens, before you come, you will be most cordially received, for you are not unknown on our side of the water; but you English make it a point to abuse us and our hospitality to that extent that we are getting suspicious of you."

"I think," said B——, in reply, "that you Americans either misunderstand Dickens or the spirit of his writings. I know for myself, and not for another, that Dickens entertains the highest opinion of you as a people. I saw and conversed with him just after his return from America, and conversed particularly with him about his visit there, and remarked the feeling that had been made manifest by the 'Notes.' I can bear testimony to the fact of his having expressed the most kindly feelings towards the people of your country. I have read the record of his visit to the United States, and cannot see what there is in it that makes it so repulsive to your countrymen. Perhaps your national *vanity* was wounded by being told of your faults, as a people. You have come in for no larger share of abuse as a nation, at the hands of Dickens, than have we at the hands of foreigners who have visited us."

Nations, like individuals, dislike to be reminded of their faults; if you want to make a man your enemy, wound his self-love. Here, perhaps, is the solution of problem of the outcry against Dickens; he saw our foibles, and knew of our inordinate vanity. *Perhaps* his great error was the utterance of too much truth. Heaven knows that when weighed in the balances of nations, in many things we are found wanting; we *have* faults enough. Feeling the truth of this, I did not attempt to question the truth of what Sir John uttered.

Bowring's idea of excellence is centered in Jeremy Bentham, his old tutor, at whose feet he sat and learned the mysteries of his philosophy. He is his tutelary saint, in whom is ordered all the glories of his Shekinah. His household treasures are a set of the collected works of the philosopher, edited by himself, consisting of eleven volumes, 8vo.; and, in showing to strangers his splendid library, will point to these treasures with much of the same feeling exhibited by Dominie Sampson when he recognizes the lost Bertram.

* It is said in his biography that his body was repacked at Zante by being placed in an additional case. Colonel Stanhope there took charge of the remains, and on the *Florida* man-of-war proceeded with them to England, where they were delivered over to Mr. Hobhouse and John Hanson, Byron's executors. By these gentlemen's orders the body was removed to the house of Sir Edward Knatchbull, where it was exhibited for awhile, and then consigned to the tomb. No mention is made of its having been consigned to Sir John. Of course Sir John's statement is correct, and should, therefore, be made public.

He is as full of reminiscences of the eccentric philosopher as a newly-fledged politician is of patriotism; only get him on the Bentham subject, and you have opened a mine of great riches.

Of Prof. L. he spoke highly; the unity of tastes for Scandinavian lore leads him to entertain opinions the most flattering of this, our very gifted countryman. Perhaps he stands not alone here.

Bowring's strong sense, good, old-fashioned common-sense, is made manifest in all his conversation; it crops out of the broad fields of his colloquial powers as the granite protrudes from the scant soil of the mountains of Hong Kong Island. His sayings are weighty with wisdom, yet there is no ostentation in his manner of speaking; his sense, and simplicity of manner, draw one who is fond of sense toward him like a magnet, and he is made at ease, because the conviction is forced that he is in the presence of a man upon whom the mantle of true greatness has fallen. This *faculty* of simplicity is not always an attribute of genius. Bowring being brought in contact with a great number of fools, most of whom are *uninformed*, it would be no wonder if his perceptions of folly should be blunted.

One of the "curiosities of literature" he showed me. I presume there is not a greater collection of autographs extant than that possessed by him. Putting three bound volumes in my hand, he bade me look within their covers and see the record. Were I to enumerate the names which stand out on the pages of the book, I would have to repeat those of the majority of the great men of the last fifty years, and many before that time. Nearly all of Briton's great men, who have flourished in this nineteenth century, speak from its pages. Here you will see a page of poetry written by the hand of the precise Wordsworth, and there the gentle Keats has his melancholy song; the sainted Shelley—even the same handwriting which put on paper "The Cenci," "The Sensitive Plant," and "Alastor." *Noctes Ambrosianæ*, and the two giants of literature and slaves of opium—have their names affixed. The man who sent the thread flying through the machinery of Lyons and gave to the world the loom—the man Jacquard—his name stares you in the face. Visions of turndown collars, misanthropic musings amidst the ruins of Rome, of ravings on the Jungfrau Alps, of grand descriptions and supreme blackguardism arise before you, as you see the sneering signature of Byron in his letters. After seeing a series of these sights, you feel like turning to the man on your right—the Nestor—and saying:

"Old man, 'tis not so hard to die."

But I am prolonging my prolific subject indefinitely. As in the first part of the evening, so it was during the latter; my company and myself had the monopoly of the Governor, for the greater portion of the company had left. I was particularly pleased with his style of address to a female literary friend of mine—it was "My dear." To make a long matter short, my impression of the man may be summed up in a phrase more expressive than nice, "that he was a first-rate fellow," first in literature, first in politics, and first as a *man* in the community in which he lives.

His hearty "Good night," and "Call again," rang out on the night air of Hong-Kong, and produced a hearty response of "I will, God bless you." I pondered, but not weak and weary, that night, as I lay in my floating couch. If "airs from Paradise did not refresh my brow, I, at least, while I lay and listened to the sighing of the night-wind as it rang its changes on the harp strings of the ship's rigging, felt within me the "stirrings of a gift divine, lit by no skill of mine." The morning sun arose and shone bright and full on the sides of Victoria Peak, and its rays glanced down on the "Residence," full and bright; then they came off to the black ship all alight; and I said, as I looked up at the mountain sides, that there was one bright spot on Hong-Kong Island;—that was said just as the light of the sun fell clear and strong upon the columns of the "Residence."

As a poet, Bowring is by no means prominent. His life has been too matter-of-fact to promote the indulgence of imagination and fancy. Yet, like many a connoisseur who never put brush to canvas, he is infallible in his judgment of his art; a piece of word-painting has but to be scanned by his critical eye, and its worth is known. I will not attempt to pass judgment on his muse; it has been weighed in balances and found wanting; yet *I* would not put my hand to the work and write his days, as a poet, numbered. A translator of the poetry of all the nations of Europe, who sings their songs even as he breathes the strains of his own native land—the one possessed of the gift of tongues of seventeen people, dead and alive—the politician and profound political economist—*may* not be a poet.

Bowring has laid himself open to the charge of gross inconsistency of conduct for his participation in the affairs of the late Chinese war. A President of the famous Peace Society, and advocating, in that capacity, the adjustment of national disputes by arbitration, it would indeed seem as though his principles did not accord with his practice. But being an interested spectator and partial actor in that war, on the ground, from the time of its commencement until near its nominal close at Tien-tsin, I learnt to make full allowance for the difficulties of his position, and for his doings consequent upon that position. One thing I do know, that the very men who were the first to urge upon him the policy of his *premature* action, were the first to sing the song of peace, and of loud abuse of the Governor of Hong-Kong, when they found that their *monetary* interests were suffering, and that the Chinese could not readily be coerced into measures of peace.

Plunged into the difficulty by a hot-headed young man, who acted as Consul at Canton, Bowring was, in a manner, *forced* to bend his neck to the yoke of circumstances. History—Hastings' fashion—will, doubtless, show that this iniquitous war, "which has terminated by all the demands of the allies being complied with!" was a premeditated thing by England. That Sir Michael Seymour and Harry Parkes were sent out to China for the *especial* work of "kicking up a breeze" with the helpless Chinese, and making them subjects of *plunder*, I no more doubt than that I have a being. I would not apologize for Bowring for his participation in the affair; but simply say that he has, throughout the whole of it, "played a second fiddle." Taking a hoe, and scraping the scum off of the filthy stream of politics, the man of letters may expect a most noisome smell to salute his nostrils, and if he sickens and dies, it is his own fault; he should never have daubed his hands with the filthy work. *Viva, vale!*

NOTE.—This paper was penned during the difficulties to which, in its latter part, it refers. What is said has something of the air of prophecy, which succeeding events have confirmed. Sir John has returned to England, and will now, it is to be hoped, be permitted the repose which he has so well earned—EDITOR.